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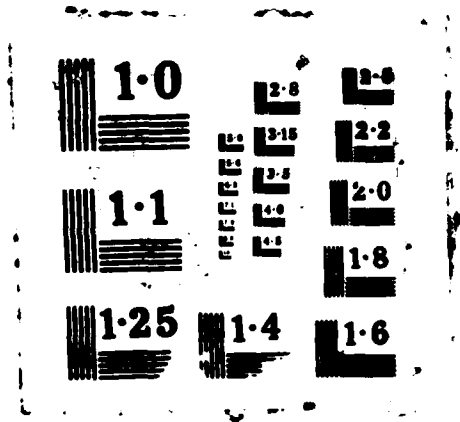
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QADDAFI: IDEALIST AND REVOLUTIONARY PHILANTHROPIST¹

Bonnie Cordes

Hardly had the dead and wounded been removed from the charred fuselage of the Egyptian airliner hijacked to Malta in late November 1985, when accusations once again were heard that Libya had masterminded this latest terrorist outrage. Days later no conclusive evidence could be offered, but the suspicions remained and only augmented those lingering from previous cases. Scarcely two weeks previously, Egypt had announced the uncovering of yet another assassination plot by Libyan henchmen against a Cairo-based exile, and had run the dramatic and damaging footage of the event on national television. The Malta incident, shockingly brutal and incomprehensible, appeared to be an indirect Libyan retaliation--as a result Egypt massed its troops on the Libyan border and called a military alert.

Colonel Muammar Qaddafi *may* have been involved. He may not have. The fact is, he is often blamed because he is so often guilty. A *known* supporter of international terrorist groups, Qaddafi claims to have carried out all sorts of outrageous acts while threatening even more. This has brought denunciations, both for things he has done and for some that he hasn't.

Since the young Colonel came to power in 1969, Western hostility towards Libya has mounted as Qaddafi paraded wave after wave of Soviet military hardware, interfered in neighboring countries' affairs, and openly encouraged and financed a ragtag lineup of national liberation movements, separatist groups, and international terrorist organizations.

It may well be that he welcomes such attention, for the basis of much of Qaddafi's power and charisma lies in his appeal as the Third World's champion against the West. He invites the West's outrage and

¹This paper is an expanded version of an Op-Ed piece published in the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, December 15, 1985.



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possibly exults in it. At the same time, this limelight has become as much of a threat to Qaddafi's 16-year rule as it is a vehicle for global notoriety.

The 'Glorious 1 September Revolution'

Qaddafi came to power in a relatively quiet coup in Libya on 1 September 1969 when the 27-year old Lieutenant and his United Free Officers took over Tripoli while the reigning King Idris was on holiday in Turkey. Few at the time took seriously his declaration of the Libyan "Green Revolution."² After a brief period of hesitation, Qaddafi and his Officers formulated the main goals of the new regime under the direction of the new Revolutionary Command Council (RCC):

to dismantle the old Libyan social elite; to turn the army into a strong political weapon; to make the revolution acceptable to as many Libyans as possible by spreading around, rapidly, the available revenues from oil; and to 'legitimize' the regime by turning Qaddafi into a charismatic figure...³

The old regime was dismantled--senior officers of the armed forces were arrested or co-opted into the new regime with diplomatic or bureaucratic posts. A strong Islamic veneer to the Revolution arrested any dissent on religious grounds: Qaddafi established Islam as the state religion and required enforcement of Koranic laws of religious observance and social conduct more strictly than previous religious authorities. Tribal leaderships were neutralized, junior members appointed to positions of influence, and the wealth of the elites was redistributed. The RCC gained firm control of Libyan oil and oil revenues while at the same time creating all sorts of social welfare programs. The Revolution

² Qaddafi described the tenets of the "Green Revolution" in the next few years in his three-volume *Green Book* (*Volume 1: The Solution of the Problem of Democracy*, 1975; *Volume 2: The Solution of the Economic Problem*, 1977; *Volume 3: The Social Basis of the Third Universal Theory*, 1978, Tripoli, Libya: Public Establishment for Publishing, Advertising and Distribution) describing a "Third Road," an alternative to capitalism and communism particularly suited to the Arab Third World.

³ John K. Cooley, *Libyan Sandstorm*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1982, p. 132.

in other words, replaced "the have-nots of the old regime..." with "the haves."⁴ Such a radical redistribution of the wealth of the country was in itself enough to build a strong base of popular support for Qaddafi.

Qaddafi: Idealist and Patron

In 1969, the United States was quickly reassured as to the nature of the new Libyan regime. Within 10 years however, that reassurance turned to acute uneasiness as Libya paraded its huge acquisitions of Soviet military hardware, including T-72 tanks and MIG-25 jet fighters never before shown off in the Middle East.⁵ But despite the show of Soviet wares and a populist-socialist ideology hinting of Marxism, Libya still depends heavily on its economic and technological ties with the West. Thousands of Soviet military advisers and technicians are said to be in Libya, but they do not represent any more than Qaddafi's desire to reap training and technological expertise. Although he has openly encouraged economic contacts with both the East and West, Qaddafi has repeatedly demonstrated that he is the pawn of neither.

The source of his enmity for the United States, however, comes less from some ideological difference than a political one: his fervent support of the Palestinian cause and attendant hatred of Israel coupled with the United States' unswerving support for Israel.

Libya is the principal supporter of a variety of hard-line, "rejectionist" Palestinian groups. Because of such activities, the United States tags Libya as "the principal terrorist and trainer of terrorists."⁶ Reports of Libyan hit squads entering the country in 1981 to assassinate President Reagan and other government officials exacerbated an already poisoned U.S.-Libyan relationship. So long as Qaddafi remains in power this relationship is not likely to be altered. Yet, because it nurtures his image, that may be precisely the way Qaddafi wants it.

⁴Ibid.

⁵*New York Times*, 14 October 1979.

⁶John Damis, "United States Relations with North Africa," *Current History*, May 1985, p. 233.

Recent press disclosures of a CIA plan to support the overthrow of Qaddafi--regardless of their accuracy--may be just what the Libyan leader is looking for. To be recognized as a threat to the international status quo validates Qaddafi and all he stands for. Yet other accounts suggest that this is the most vulnerable time in Qaddafi's career as an international maverick. In any event, he has proffered one of the more unusual formulas for retaining power. One of the most colorful characters of our time, it is his brashness, and calculated craziness, buoyed by a feeling of omnipotence that have been the keys to his "success."

In a world aroused by Islamic fundamentalist terrorism, the Libyan blend of religion and revolution is increasingly ominous. Islam is at the foundation of Qaddafi's worldview, mixed in with a heady concoction of secular anti-imperialism. This novel ideology is based on Qaddafi's vision of himself and his country as an original, new, revolutionary order and, according to an official Libyan government publication, as "an organic part of the movement of the Third World, struggling for emancipation, progress, and freedom from imperialist domination."

Qaddafi's belief that with money and ideology he could radically reshape Libya and thereby create a model for the entire Third World, led him to this role as patron of all world revolutions. Fueled by Libyan petrodollars and driven by this quest, Qaddafi promiscuously underwrote liberation movements and peoples' struggles around the globe, with little regard to affiliation or cause. The Libyan leader is patron to guerrilla, national liberation movements, and international terrorist groups as diverse as Irish Republican terrorists, Philippine opposition groups, Palestinian nationalists, European anarchists, and Central American revolutionaries. Most U.S. officials credit him with the mining of the Red Sea which has to date damaged over twenty oil tankers and merchant vessels in the name of "Islamic Jihad." Moral and material support has also been given to American Black Muslim Louis Farrakhan and striking British miners, thus enhancing Qaddafi's reputation as revolutionary "philanthropist." Most recently his substantial involvement in funding Nicaraguan and El Salvadoran leftist groups has given him a reputation as an opportunist, an appendage of the Soviet

Union, trying to underwrite their covert effort to destabilize the West.

Qaddafi and Arab Unity

Where idealism may lead him astray, it is his fervent belief in his Third Universal Theory which has led him in the drive to "export" his revolution. Libya's intervention in the internal affairs of the Sudan, Uganda, Ethiopia, Yemen, Chad, Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco (to name a few) have destroyed Qaddafi's credibility with his neighbors and the Western world. His attempts to fabricate multi-lateral agreements of "Arab unity" and weld a united front against Israel, have only planted the seeds of Arab *disunity*. When thousands of once-welcomed immigrant workers from Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Mali, Nigeria and Algeria were recently expelled from Libya because of foreign exchange shortages, the expulsions triggered a panic, creating an atmosphere of distrust and suspicion among Libya's neighbors.

And with good reason. Many of the returning immigrants had reportedly been indoctrinated and trained in terrorist activities, giving further credence to Qaddafi's repeated threats to train North African nationals in subversive activities if Libyan efforts on behalf of Arab unity are rebuffed. Accordingly, resistance from fellow Arabs to the Qaddafi aura is reflexively condemned as collusion with the great American Satan.

Qaddafi's Opposition

Qaddafi's fiercely imperious foreign policy alongside his moral and financial support of terrorist groups have bred cults of Qaddafi haters and supporters. But, the opposition to Qaddafi has been weak and fragmented. And with impunity he keeps it that way.

Ruthlessly and unapologetically he has deployed "hit squads" to assassinate some and to intimidate others who have opposed his rule. Libya is certainly not the first regime to undertake the liquidation of dissidents, even outside of national borders. Bulgarian, Romanian and Czech exiles have met their fate by assassins' bullets. But surely Libya is the first to baldly announce its intention to carry out such a campaign. The U.S. State Department made public what officials said was the text of a "communique" from supporters of Colonel Qaddafi in the

United States to other Libyans: "Physical liquidation is the final stage in the dialectic conflict between the Revolution and its enemies, when all other means of liquidation (social, economic and political) have failed."⁷

The battle of pro- and anti-Qaddafi factions took place abroad, on occasion the attacks becoming more violent and indiscriminate. In February 1981, Libyan hit men sprayed passengers at Italy's Fiumicino airport with machine-gun fire in their efforts to liquidate one Libyan (who was not even on board). Bombings were sometimes used to carry out assassinations and scare campaigns--one bombing in March 1984 at Heathrow Airport, London, resulted in 23 non-Libyan civilian injuries. Another machine-gun attack on a restaurant in Paris successfully eliminated a Libyan opponent. In 1985, reports still persisted of Libyan intentions, according to the official Libyan news agency *Jana*, that Qaddafi hit squads would continue to be formed "to chase traitors, fugitives, and stray dogs wherever they are and liquidate them physically without hesitation."⁸ At the time of this writing, twenty anti-Qaddafi exiles have been assassinated since 1980, while many others have escaped unsuccessful attempts.⁹ Egypt alone claims to have thwarted four Libyan operations undertaken during the past two years to eliminate Libyan exiles enjoying political asylum in Egypt.

It was in early May 1984 that a direct challenge was mounted to Qaddafi's hold on Libya. An attempted coup in Tripoli resulted in a sweep of the city by the "people's militia": 500 to 3,000 arrests, several revolutionary tribunals set up by the people's committees, and numerous individuals hanged publicly, along with Qaddafi's public appearance on the streets to demonstrate that he was unharmed indicated that the attack had been a dismal failure.

⁷*New York Times*, 8 May 1980.

⁸*Washington Post*, 30 May 1985, citing a late 1984 Libyan press agency report.

⁹Attacks have taken place in Lebanon, Italy, the United Kingdom, Federal Republic of Germany, Greece, Cyprus and the United States.

The attempt was conceived and launched by the major Libyan opposition group located in the Sudan and calling itself the National Salvation Front for Libya (NSF). The May coup attempt, planned to take advantage of the turmoil following the London incident,¹⁰ seemed aborted when the leader of the group, prominent dissident Ahmad Ahwas, was arrested and subsequently killed with two companions after crossing the border from Tunisia.¹¹ Although it is difficult to obtain exact details of the killing of Ahwas and subsequent events, it seems that those commandos in Tripoli awaiting his arrival decided that their own discovery was inevitable after his death and that they should at least make a go of it. The planned attack against the Bab al-Assiziya barracks, Qaddafi's headquarters (chosen by him over the Presidential Palace), did take place, reportedly engaging Libyan troops and resulting in 80 troop fatalities and the death or arrest, trial and death, of all members of the commando team. Although it failed miserably, it was meant to be seen as a demonstration to the public that opposition to Qaddafi was real. This goal, at least, it achieved. Despite Qaddafi's boasts to the contrary, it is the view of some observers that the dissident movement within Libya is extensive, well-organized, and enjoys widespread sympathy.¹²

Following the May coup attempt, Libya announced that suicide squads would be formed to combat the National Salvation Front. Indeed, four Libyan dissidents were killed in late June 1984 during a visit to Greece by a Libyan foreign liaison bureau secretary, and three others before mid-July.¹³

¹⁰In April 1984 the Libyan embassy incident in the United Kingdom ended after a 10-day siege, the death of a British policewoman and injury to 12 anti-Qaddafi demonstrators. Britain cut off diplomatic relations with Libya.

¹¹"Universal Fear Said to Prevail in Wake of Terror Campaign", *Africa Confidential*, London, #18, 5 September 1984, pp. 3-5.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

It seems, however, only a matter of time before such opposition groups will be heard from again. Evidence of, and action by, the previously invisible opposition erodes the prestige and self-declared legitimacy of Qaddafi's regime as a popularly supported government. Rumors and unsubstantiated reports persist of a series of incidents inside Libya in the past two years (most recently one of a car accident victim in Libya, army officer and cousin to Qaddafi, who was later found to be riddled with bullets) that may be counter indications to the public display of popular affection and idolatry for Qaddafi that is shown internationally.

Qaddafi's Future?

Although money bought Qaddafi a place in the international theater, his abuse of the power it gave him has discredited him abroad. That, however, appears to be the very basis for his resiliency at home. As most colorfully portrayed by Ruth First in *Libya: The Elusive Revolution*, it is the combination of money, power, sincerity, and naivete which presents the most confounding contradictions to those who try to study Libya or understand Qaddafi:

There is something riveting about the audacity of his indictment and the simplicity of his solutions. In Cairo intellectuals who read his interviews in *Le Monde* and his speeches in their own newspapers bury their heads in their hands at his naivete. In the Maghreb cities, Arab but also permeated by French culture, Gadafi has been seen as a latter-day *Asterix* absorbed in his picaresque adventures, and cut off from history and the world.¹⁴

While Libya's oil revenues have provided the country 99% of its yearly income of \$22 billion, the oil glut of the 1980s has left Libya with still declining financial resources, even after reaching a low of \$9 billion. But with only a population of three million people to provide for, Qaddafi is sure to weather this storm.

¹⁴Ruth First, *Libya: The Elusive Revolution*, Africana Publishing Company, New York, 1975, p. 13.

Virtually unlimited funds had originally allowed him to make dramatic, far-reaching changes in Libyan society. Since the 1969 revolution the health, education, and welfare of the Libyan people have vastly improved, although investment in development projects far outpaces the country's ability to absorb the new industrial base. Thousands of invited foreign workers (recently many *disinvited* as noted above) have eased somewhat the still acute shortage of indigenous labor. Much of the private interests in Libya have either been nationalized or discouraged: hence more and more of the populace is directly dependent upon the government for work and salary. But, the welfare state Qaddafi has created ably quells disaffection and other social discontent.

By any traditional political analysis, Qaddafi's exploits should have resulted in the collapse of his regime. Egypt's Anwar Sadat was the first, and not the last, to publicly declare the view of Qaddafi as insane, fanatic, and unstable, destroying any credibility the leader may have had. Such a characterization makes approaches to him in the traditional manner somewhat futile. Because he *does* act on principle--based on a purely "Qaddafian" morality--rather than in response to pressure, he cannot be influenced, particularly as he continues to see his opposition to the international status quo as "an article of faith." Whether he *is* irrational, at least by our standards, or whether this is some huge cultural/political misunderstanding seems useless to debate.

He has flouted all the rules by which nations are supposed to behave. The use of terror as an integral tool of state policy makes Qaddafi not only unpredictable, but undesirable and prey, in the name of the international status quo, to external intrigue.

Attacks on him from within or without are sure to provoke a harsh backlash--as was demonstrated after the unsuccessful coup attempt in May 1984 mounted by his opposition. Students publicly hanging fellow students, however, only hardened those Libyans committed to Qaddafi's downfall. The opposition, although scattered and disorganized as yet, is still alive. Qaddafi is obliged to be ever more vigilant against covert and overt threats to his person and regime. Increases in repressive measures may be his only option.

While actually doing some good for his people and his country, Qaddafi has been ruthless towards his opposition and has courted the hatred of the West. As one Qaddafi-watcher has stated, the man seems unlikely to die in bed.¹⁵

¹⁵Lisa Anderson, "Assessing Libya's Qaddafi," *Current History*, May 1985, p. 227.

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